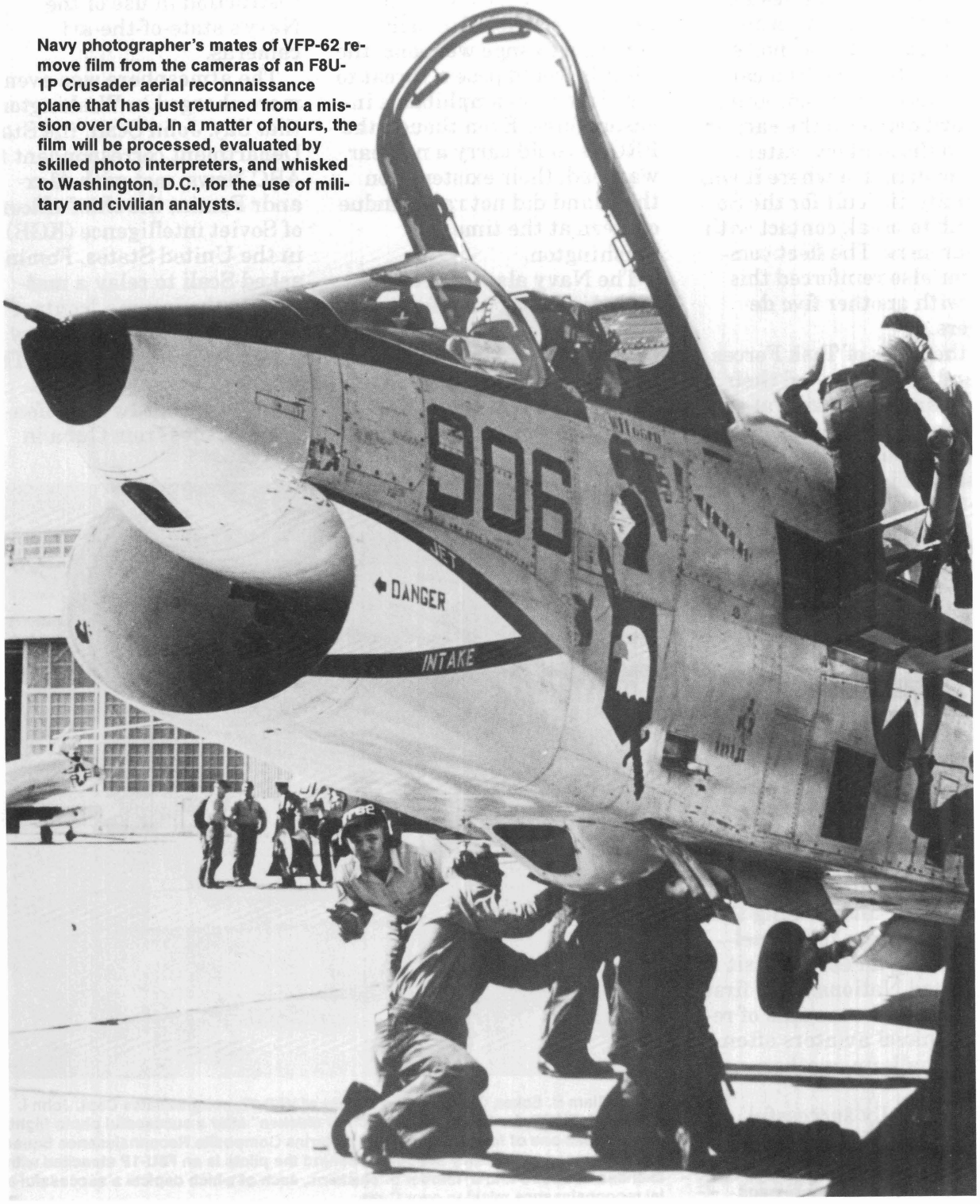
NAH, Cuba Ops. 1962



Navy photographer's mates of VFP-62 remove film from the cameras of an F8U-1P Crusader aerial reconnaissance plane that has just returned from a mission over Cuba. In a matter of hours, the film will be processed, evaluated by skilled photo interpreters, and whisked to Washington, D.C., for the use of military and civilian analysts.

quarantine line just southeast of the Bahamas, but headed to the northeast. The other, designated C-21, was picked up east of Jamaica by a carrier in Task Force 135. Admiral Ward deployed the carrier force to the shallow waters south of Jamaica where it was especially difficult for the Soviet sub to break contact with her pursuers. The fleet commander also reinforced this force with another five destroyers.

As the units of Task Forces 135 and 136 tightened their surface and air patrols at sea, other naval units carried out the hazardous low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba. VFP-62 flew its first missions over the island the day after the president's address to the nation. Flying at tree-top level at 350 knots, the Crusader jets and their pilots captured on film detailed information on the Soviet missile installations. Ground crewmen at NAS Cecil Field used stencils depicting a fat Castro and a dead chicken to paint a photo mission "victory" on every returning plane. (The chicken was inspired by accounts of Castro's slaughtering and cooking the birds in his New York hotel room during an earlier visit to the United Nations.) The first words out of the mouths of returning naval aviators often were, "Chalk up another chicken!"

An especially successful VFP-62 mission occurred on 25 October, when squadron aircraft confirmed the presence in Cuba of Soviet FROG (Free Rocket Over Ground) tactical rockets. Although only short-range weapons, the FROGs would pose a threat to any American amphibious invasion force. Even though the FROGs could carry a nuclear warhead, their existence on the island did not raise undue concern at the time in Washington.

The Navy also helped prepare Air Force units for low-level aerial photographic missions. The Air Force had tactical reconnaissance units in TAC, but their personnel needed specialized training in such low-level missions and instruction in use of the Navy's state-of-the-art cameras.

The atmosphere was even more charged in Washington that day. John Scali, the State Department correspondent for ABC News, met with Alexandr Fomin, the chief officer of Soviet intelligence (KGB) in the United States. Fomin asked Scali to relay a message to the latter's "contact" (understood to be Secretary Rusk) at the department. The message was a Soviet proposal to withdraw the offensive missiles from Cuba in

NAH, VFP-62

Cdr. William B. Ecker, Commanding Officer of VFP-62, congratulates Capt. John I. Hudson, USMCR, for "chalking up another chicken" after a successful photo flight. Hudson was one of four Marine pilots of Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 2 assigned to the Navy squadron. Behind the pilots is an F8U-1P stenciled with a likeness of Castro and a number of chickens, each of which depicts a successful aerial reconnaissance mission over Cuba.

exchange for President Kennedy's promise not to invade Cuba. As expected, Scali passed on the information.

Other developments that day were not so positive and indeed seemed ominous. Counterintelligence agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned the White House that the Soviets were burning documents at their embassy in Washington and their UN enclave on Long Island. The burning of diplomatic and other secret papers often, in the past, meant war was imminent.

Around 1800 EDT, President Kennedy received a message from Premier Khrushchev. The Soviet leader proposed in a lengthy statement that his government would withdraw the offensive missiles and destroy their launch sites in Cuba if the United States would lift the blockade and agree not to invade the island. This message, of course, was similar to the one Scali received.

The EXCOM was unsure how to interpret these two communications. Even though Khrushchev appeared willing to negotiate, the Soviets continued working on the missile sites in Cuba. Was the message another deception? The president and his chief advisors kept the message to themselves and awaited further developments.

The U.S.-Soviet confrontation at sea came to a head on 27 October when the tanker *Groznyy*, carrying ammonia, approached the quarantine line. Washington feared that Moscow intended to test the quarantine with this ship, which Navy patrol planes had picked up the previous day but then lost track of. Responding to a Navy request for assistance, SAC assigned Air Force RB-47 aircraft to the seaborne search effort and deployed them to the naval station on Bermuda. On the morning of the 27th, one of the RB-47s crashed on takeoff, killing the four-man crew, but one of the other planes spotted *Groznyy* north of the Virgin Islands and heading for Cuba. After radioing the location of the tanker, the RB-47 made simulated bombing runs on the ship to stop her—to no avail. *Groznyy* also failed to respond when a Navy destroyer, vectored to the tanker, signaled her to stop.

The tension rose when Admiral Dennison ordered U.S. ships on the scene to load their five-inch guns with live ammunition. CINCLANT soon ordered the destroyers to clear their guns by firing them into the sea away from the tanker. This fire, along with a few star shell illumination rounds close aboard the tanker, persuaded the Soviet captain to stop. Soon after he radioed Moscow for instructions, his ship put about and left the quarantine zone.

Not only was tension high at sea during this episode but in Washington. Both Admiral Anderson and Secretary McNamara monitored the incident from the Navy's Flag Plot command center in the Pentagon. Dennison radioed for additional instructions after ordering his destroyers to load their weapons. Before the CNO responded, McNamara asked him, "What happens if *Groznyy* does not stop?" Anderson replied that the quarantine instructions plainly stated that if a ship continued to proceed after the proper warnings, the U.S. warships would stop her by shooting away the vessel's rudder. McNamara heatedly informed Anderson that the Navy would take no such action against Soviet ships without his and the president's authorization. After almost a week of high tension, nerves were taut all around.

A climax to the crisis approached on the morning of Saturday, 27 October, when the EXCOM met to consider the president's response to Khrushchev's communication. McCone and Lundahl opened the meeting with a sobering report that all of the MRBM sites were now operational, that work continued at a furious pace at the IRBM sites, and that the Il-28s were being assembled. Still, there was consensus that a positive reply to Krushchev's letter was the best course of action.

Then, a second message from Khrushchev arrived that cast a shadow over the EXCOM. This time, the mercurial Soviet leader demanded that U.S. missiles be withdrawn from Turkey in exchange for similar Soviet action with regard to Cuba.

Some EXCOM members felt that Khrushchev might be losing control of the Kremlin, or that the hard-liners wanted more concessions from Kennedy.

Soon after receipt of the second troubling message, more bad news arrived at the White House. The Air Force informed the president that a U-2 on a routine air sampling mission accidently flew over northeastern Siberia. The Soviets immediately scrambled fighter aircraft to intercept the reconnaissance plane. The American pilot and his plane escaped, but the incident further heightened tensions in Moscow and Washington.

The morning continued to go badly. Over eastern Cuba, a SAM battery shot down an Air Force U-2, killing the pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson. This seemed to signal another change in Soviet policy. Another report stated that Cubans had fired on the low-level photo missions that day.

With these developments as a backdrop, that afternoon the Joint Chiefs proposed that not later than Monday, 29 October, the United States initiate air strikes against Cuba. Then, seven days later, the U.S. armed forces would invade the island by air and sea.

With the prospect of conflict increasing dramatically, Kennedy decided to respond to Khrushchev's first communication, the more reasonable of the two. At the president's request, his brother Robert met with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin late that evening. The attorney general informed Dobrynin that the United States government would accept Khrushchev's offer to remove the missiles from Cuba and in return would make a public pledge not to invade Cuba. Robert Kennedy emphasized that if the Soviet government agreed to the American proposal, it must do so quickly, otherwise the United States would be compelled to remove the missiles by force. He also mentioned that for some time the president had been considering the withdrawal of the U.S. IRBMs from Turkey and that this would occur in the near future. The attorney general made it clear, however, that the removal of the missiles in Turkey was not public information, and if the Soviets violated this "secret" agreement, the entire deal was off. In short, President Kennedy was suggesting that the United States was making its final offer to settle the crisis.

That same day, correspondent John Scali had his second meeting with KGB officer Fomin. Scali accused Fomin of a "stinking double cross," stalling for time, and playing him for a fool. The Soviet insisted that the offer he had transmitted was legitimate and that he would contact Moscow directly. According to one historian of the crisis, Scali's outburst helped convince Khrushchev that the Americans would not brook further delay or posturing.

Capping the day's events and indicating the gravity of the situation, the ships of Task Group Alfa closed in on a Soviet submarine (contact C-19) first located on the 26th. To signal the undersea vessel that American naval forces were aware of her presence, sailors on the destroyer *Cony* dropped five hand grenades over the side. The sound from these exploding grenades could be easily picked up by the submarine's sonar. Three hours later, the Foxtrot-class boat surfaced and identified herself as the Soviet naval vessel *Korablx* (*Ship X*). Escorted by several U.S. warships, the submarine proceeded at slow speed on an easterly heading into the open Atlantic.

As the sun rose on Sunday, 28 October, the armed might of the United States was prepared for all likely contingencies. Polaris submarines and SAC bombers and ICBMs stood ready to incinerate the Soviet Union if its leaders launched a direct attack on the United States. U.S. Atlantic Fleet carrier, surface, and attack submarine forces, with Canadian naval units in support, were deployed in strength in the Atlantic and Caribbean. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps tactical fighter and attack squadrons remained on alert at bases in the southern United States. Army airborne, infantry, and armored divisions, as well as Marine Corps landing forces, awaited an order to start the invasion of Cuba. Although

the president temporarily suspended U-2 flights over the island after Anderson's loss, Navy and Air Force reconnaissance aircraft, with heavily armed fighters flying in support off the Cuban coast, continued to execute low-level photo missions.

Also at full alert were Soviet and Cuban forces on the island. In addition to the MRBM, IRBM, and SAM batteries, the Soviets had ready for battle in Cuba four regimental combat groups equipped with tanks, armored personnel carriers, antitank missiles, and Luna (FROG) tactical rockets. Unknown to U.S. intelligence, tactical nuclear warheads for the Lunas had been stockpiled in Cuba. The Soviet military commander in Cuba was authorized to use the short-range weapons to defeat an amphibious invasion by American forces. In addition to the Soviet units, the Cubans fielded a regular force of 75,000, a reserve force of 100,000, and a militia of 100,000.

As official Washington anxiously waited, shortly after 0900 EDT on 28 October, a message started coming in from Moscow. Even though the communication arrived in several parts, the opening paragraphs made it clear that Khrushchev had accepted the president's proposal. The Soviets would withdraw their missiles from Cuba. The likelihood of war, either a global nuclear conflagration or a devastating Caribbean conflict, was greatly diminished.

Photographed by an American P2V Neptune, probably from VP-5, Soviet Foxtrot-class submarine 911 heads due east into the Atlantic. For 35 hours, the submerged *F 911* tried to evade detection by U.S. forces. Destroyer *Charles P. Cecil* (DDR 835) and patrol planes never lost contact with the submarine, however, finally forcing the Soviet boat to surface for a battery recharge.

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